
THE AMERICAN ART RESEARCH COUNCIL

N81
.A4
1942

THE AMERICAN ART RESEARCH COUNCIL

A Cooperative Museum Project

Established 1942 by the

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

10 West Eighth Street

New York

1181
A4
1942

*Printed by the
Brooklyn Museum Press*

THE AMERICAN ART RESEARCH COUNCIL

THE NEED for reliable information on the works of American artists has been recognized for some time. We have had plenty of biographies and appreciations, but not much thorough study of their actual works. The most important thing about an artist, in the last analysis, is his work. To locate and identify it, to separate the genuine from the spurious, and to make a permanent record of it for the future, is the most valuable service that a research worker can perform.

This has been done for almost every leading European of the nineteenth century, but for few Americans. The available knowledge on even the chief figures is often inaccurate and fragmentary. There is no complete data on works in private collections or even in museums. Well-known pictures have dropped out of sight. On only a few artists are there adequate catalogues.

The situation as to authenticity in American art is increasingly serious. There is scarcely a leading figure of the past who has not been forged. A conspicuous example is Albert Ryder. The small number of his paintings, their high value, and the fact that they looked easy

to imitate, have attracted forgers for many years. Today the business is a major industry, and there are at least five times as many pseudo-Ryders as genuine ones. In this avalanche of fakes the real Ryder has been buried. Even the fakers no longer know what he was like; they are imitating each other. Here is one of America's greatest artists, who died only twenty-five years ago, but whose art is almost lost to us.

Ryder is an extreme example, but there are many others. The proportion of false to genuine Blakelocks is about the same as with Ryder. Winslow Homer, with his unmistakable style, would seem the last man to attract forgers; yet over three hundred posthumous Homers have been recorded. Of this generation, Inness, Whistler, Martin, Wyant, Duvenceck, Sargent and others have been widely forged. In fact it is difficult to name a single well-known figure, of this period or earlier, who is immune. And forgeries of more recent men are already beginning to appear.

The forger's chief victim is the inexperienced collector; but he is by no means the only victim. Well-known collectors and dealers and even important museums have been victimized. Institutions which would not purchase an old master without thorough investigation have too frequently, in their acquisitions and exhibitions of American art, shown unawareness that problems of authenticity exist in this field also.

The remedy is more accurate and more complete data on the works of American artists. Nothing is so calculated to deter forgers. The rarity of forgeries of

Thomas Eakins, for example, can be explained largely by the existence of a catalogue of his pictures. Aside from their use in combatting forgery, such records have a permanent value as firsthand sources of information on American art.

A vast amount of documentation exists in the American field, especially for the last hundred years. Pictures were reproduced and described in contemporary books, magazines and newspapers, and were exhibited and sold at auction. Records of the artist's dealers are sometimes still available. Often the artist's family, friends or pupils are living, and his letters and journals are extant. All of this makes for a completeness of documentation such as did not exist in any earlier period. A large proportion of the works of our leading artists can be proved to be genuine by evidence that is not a matter of opinion but of objective fact. Even in extreme cases like Ryder and Blakelock, where forgeries outnumber genuine pictures, there is a nucleus of works whose authenticity is beyond question.

By intensive study of this body of unquestionably authentic works, using X-ray, microscope and other laboratory methods where necessary, information on their style and physical characteristics can be gained, for comparison with other works which lack documentation. On the basis of such thorough knowledge the expert is prepared to form opinions on authenticity.

The field of early American art presents different problems. Contemporary records are extremely meagre. Many portraits are unsigned. Traditional attributions

are often misleading. Before the days of modern criticism anonymous pictures were ascribed to the most famous artists to whom they bore any resemblance; thus any pre-Revolutionary portrait of a severe realistic type became a Copley. At first this was innocent enough, but more recently the faker has entered the scene with his forged signatures, repaintings and fictitious pedigrees.

In the dearth of firsthand records in early American art, attribution has to be based largely on stylistic grounds, and is more a matter of opinion than in periods nearer our own time. Naturally scholars do not always agree, any more than they do in older European fields. But the data on which opinions are based is increasing year by year. Laboratory examination is exposing modern forgeries, repaintings and added signatures, and building up information on artists' technical methods. Some of the best efforts of our scholars are being devoted to these problems, and already there is an increasing consensus of opinion on essential points.

The day is past when the individual expert can attempt to cover all American art. This is a day of specialists who know a single period or a few artists but know them thoroughly. There are now a number of such experts in the museum field and outside. However, they have been handicapped by lack of research assistance, of laboratory facilities, and of public understanding of their work. Research of the thorough kind that is needed cannot be easily done singlehanded. Museums, on the other hand, have not known to whom to turn for reliable information. The whole problem of authenticity has

grown beyond the individual expert's control. The time has come for a broader cooperative effort.

In February, 1942, the Whitney Museum of American Art proposed that the museums of the country, acting in cooperation, should sponsor a central agency for research in American art, in particular relation to problems of authenticity. At a meeting at the Whitney Museum on April 11th, 1942, the matter was discussed by directors and representatives of the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of the City of New York, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Yale University Art Gallery. Mr. Laurance P. Roberts, director of the Brooklyn Museum, acted as chairman. It was agreed that such an agency should be established, under the name of the American Art Research Council. The offices are in the Whitney Museum. The Museum's research curator, Lloyd Goodrich, and the Museum's curator, Hermon More, are respectively director and associate director of the Council. The Brooklyn Museum, which has cooperated in the project from the beginning, is placing the Museum's laboratory and the services of its laboratory expert, Mr. Sheldon Keck, at the disposal of the Council.

With the cooperation of museums and of experts outside of museums, the Council will compile records of the works of leading American artists. These records

will include photographs, X-rays if necessary, information as to medium, size, signature, date, history, owners, exhibitions, reproductions and auction sales. In the beginning, about fifty of the most prominent artists will be selected for recording.

All museums will be asked to cooperate by supplying information and photographs of works by these selected artists in their collections or lent to them at any time. In this way there will be built up a complete inventory of works by leading American artists in public collections. Later the same information will be gathered from private collections. If a museum has on its staff an authority on any particular artist or period, the Council will request the museum to allow him to assist in gathering data. When a museum has assembled a noteworthy exhibition in the American field, it will be asked to make the research data available.

Experts outside of museums will be asked to cooperate. Many of them have extensive records, and for the present no attempt will be made to duplicate these, although it is hoped that eventually they may be deposited with the Council. In case a writer has data on an artist which has never been coordinated into a catalogue of his work, the Council could assist him to do this.

There are a number of important artists, particularly in the later nineteenth century, on whom no expert opinion is available. Many of these have been extensively forged. On these the Council will conduct original research, starting with works which have unquestionable histories going back to the artists' lifetimes. By col-

lecting data on several at the same time, the amount of labor, which would be prohibitive if applied to a single artist, can be reduced to a practicable point.

The families of certain artists who have recently died will be asked to help make complete records of their works. Works still in the possession of the families will be photographed.

There is no reason why the confusion that surrounds so many figures of the past should extend to our contemporaries. They are alive and able to supply information. A certain number of living artists will be selected and, with their assistance, complete photographic records will be made. Such firsthand records, supplied by the artists themselves, should be a sure safeguard against forgery, and a permanent source of valuable information on present-day art for the future. The names of the artists for obvious reasons will not be made public. This work, which in the long run should be one of the Council's most important functions, will be under the direction of Mr. More.

For the present no attempt will be made to duplicate the photographic records of the Frick Art Reference Library, but rather to gather material which will supplement them. Photographic expenses will be kept at a minimum, and wherever possible the source of the photograph will be noted without attempting to get a print, unless needed for research purposes.

The Council will give opinions as to authenticity on American works of art to any museums which submit them, including works which they own or are con-

sidering for acquisition. Opinions will not be given to anyone outside of the museum field. The Council will submit the works to the best qualified experts, and if desired will assist them with laboratory examination and X-rays. The Council itself will not attempt to give opinions unless members of its staff are competent to speak on the particular artists. When no reliable expert opinion is available, the Council will either decline to pass on the work or will submit a purely factual report, based on laboratory examination and research into the history of the work. There will be no charge to museums, except for such extra expenses as X-rays. The Council has secured legal advice as to the wording of opinions, and will exercise the utmost care in giving them.

The Whitney Museum is contributing the offices, the clerical assistance, and the services of Mr. Goodrich and Mr. More, who will devote half their time to the Council. The Brooklyn Museum is contributing the services of Mr. Keck and the use of the Museum's laboratory. In addition, the Council will employ a full-time trained research assistant, whose salary is to come from contributions by interested institutions, as will funds for photographs.

The program for the first year will take into consideration the facilities available at present. The Council will not try to cover too much ground, but will undertake definite, limited projects which can be completed within the initial period and will form permanent contributions to the knowledge of American art. At the same time, the groundwork will be laid for any

possible future expansion of the Council beyond its present connection with the Whitney Museum.

In undertaking this work, the Council asks the co-operation of all museums interested in American art. It would like to have them as members of the Council, which involves no financial responsibility. It would like to call upon them for photographs and information on works in their collections, and for the help of staff members who are authorities. And it would welcome their active support in this cooperative undertaking which it believes will be of permanent value to the art of our country.

